

Rocky starts: the arrival of Roman poetry in Britain

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What have the Romans ever done for us? Well, there is the aqueduct, of course. And sanitation. And the roads. Medicine. Education. Irrigation. Public health, baths, and public order. There is one perhaps surprising item absent from the Monty Python's immortal list of the 'blessings' of Roman provincial life: public poetry. With the Roman habit of creating lettered environments, the use of publicly displayed, or at least visible, poetry came about across the empire – both in monumental and in more informal settings. In this piece, Peter Kruschwitz discusses its arrival in Roman Britain.

Pushing the boundaries

During the life-times of most classical Roman poets, their work was firmly linked to the literary, cultural, and societal life of the city of Rome. From here, however, their poetry, carried by their popularity, soon embarked on a journey to transcend the boundaries of time and space. It is in this way that Virgil's *Aeneid* eventually arrived in the most remote, and most recent, accession to Rome's empire – Britain.

One might be tempted to think that poetry in Roman Britain, and the enjoyment of literary poetry in particular, was an upper-class phenomenon. Rather unsurprisingly, references to the *Aeneid* were found in upper-class houses. One such example is the quotation of *Aeneid* 1.313 = 12.165 that was painted on the wall plaster of an elite home, a Roman villa near Otford (Kent), where the text accompanied an image of a male figure throwing a spear:

Bina manu l[ato] crispans hastilia
ferro (?)
[Brandishing] two [spears with]
b[road heads] in his hand...

Even more remarkable is the poem that accompanies a mosaic discovered in the lavish Roman villa at Lullingstone (Kent), depicting the abduction of Europa by Jupiter in the form of a bull. The distich (or pair of lines) alludes to a well-known story from the *Aeneid* (when Juno calls on the wind-god Aeolus to unleash a sea-storm against Aeneas), and introduces a delightful female perspective to the Europa myth:

Inuida si t[a]uri uidisset Iuno natus,
iustius Aeolias isset ad usque domos.

*Had jealous Juno seen the bull's swimming attempts,
More rightfully still would she have approached the halls of Aeolus.*

But both Virgil himself and Roman poetry in general were never just confined to elite homes and families. For example, a humble clay tile from Silchester (Hampshire), now kept in Reading Museum, displays the following text – a string of names (and / or insults? *Perfidus* means 'Traitor') with an added half-line from the *Aeneid*:

Pertacus, Perfidus,
Campester, Lucilianus,
Campanus: conticuere omnes.
*Pertacus, Perfidus, Campester,
Lucilianus, Campanus: they all fell silent.*

Conticuere omnes is the opening phrase of the second book of Virgil's *Aeneid*, marking the beginning of Aeneas' report of the Trojans' escape from their war-torn home, their dangerous escape across the Mediterranean, and their quest for a new, safe place to re-establish themselves. On the Silchester tile, however, Virgil's quote has found a new context, and perhaps seems to act like a curse: as often, the lack of information about the context of this graffito makes it hard to judge the writer's intention and motivation.

Further evidence for Virgil in Roman Britain comes from as far north as Hadrian's Wall. Not one, but two instances

have come to light from this region so far: in addition to what may have been a writing exercise at Vindolanda, a graffito that draws on Virgilian lines such as *Aeneid* 4.700 was inscribed on the rockface of a quarry at Comb Crag (Cumbria):

Aurea per caelum uolitat Victoria
pennis
Golden Victory flutters through the sky with her wings.

With Hadrian's Wall almost in plain sight from there, the art of Rome's classic epic poet had thus – quite literally – reached the very limits of what Virgil himself had imagined to be an *imperium sine fine*.

Vanguard poetry

Though without a doubt a location at which toil, boredom, and constant fear of the unexpected and the unknown were part of daily life, Hadrian's Wall may not strike one as a place at which poetry and Roman song culture would have played any major role. This view would be mistaken, however. Around two dozen or so instances of verse inscriptions – mostly in Latin, but also occasionally in Greek – have so far been recorded for Roman Britain. A substantial number of them can be related to Rome's military establishment in some shape or form, and several have emerged in relatively close proximity to Rome's northern border. This means that, in addition to war, destruction, death, and Roman rule, Roman soldiers, recruited from across the empire, brought poetry in their knapsacks – and it is from their monumental poetry that one gets to learn about their own insecurities, vulnerabilities, and concerns.

An inscription from Risingham (Northumberland) reports a curious premonition that a soldier called Fabius – otherwise unknown – experienced in a dream:

Somnio prae-
monitus
miles hanc
ponere ius-
sit
aram quae
Fabio nup-
ta est Nym-

phis uene-
randis.

*Forewarned in a dream the soldier
commanded that this altar be
erected by her who is married to
Fabius, to the venerable Nymphs.*

It is impossible to establish the nature of Fabius' premonition, though, considering the wording of this inscription. It would seem plausible to assume that it was one that affected him (and his wife) on a personal level rather than one related to his military duties.

The mental strain and toll that service in Roman Britain's north took on the soldiers should not be underestimated. A second verse inscription from Risingham, an outpost fort of Hadrian's Wall, survives only in heavily fragmented form, but the remaining pieces suggest that the text was composed in dactylic hexameters, the metre of epic poetry. As far as one can tell it appears to have referred to a soldier's experience of frost and broken spirits:

[- - - Flam]inii ++nsae
[- - -]ae dominar-
[- - - se]mper geli-
[dis - - -]te pruinis
[- - -]++ qui sib[i]
[- - -]++++AS
[- - -]+FICTNI
[- - -]+ue frag-
[- - -]+E tibi pro
[- - -]rce pro
[- - -] Flaminus o-
[- - -]e profund-
[- - -]lucem uolu-
[it - - -]dere uitae.
... of Flaminus ... nsa
... dominate
... always in cold
... frost
... who himself
.....
... broken
... to you for
... (spare?) for
... Flaminus ...
... shed
... light ... he want-
ed ... of life.

Motivation in a hostile environment and in rather inclement weather conditions, as other sources such as the famous letters from Vindolanda also suggest, clearly was an issue that was on the Roman soldiers' collective minds.

Another aspect of Roman military life not commonly considered, yet very much present in the verse inscriptions from across the empire, is the desire to maintain family life in some shape or form. Time and time again, even the most battle-hardened soldiers appear to have felt compelled to resort to poetry to express their grief over the loss of a loved one. The tombstone of a short-lived girl called Corellia Optata, preserved in the

Yorkshire Museum, is perhaps the most striking example for that from Roman Britain:

[D(is)] M(anibus).
Corellia Optata an(norum) XIII.
Secreti Manes, qui regna
Acherusia Ditis incolit-
tis, quos parua petunt post
lumina uit(a)e exiguis cinis
et simulacrum, corpo<r>is um-
bra: insontis gnat(a)e geni-
tor spe captus iniqua
supremum hunc nat(a)e
miserandus defleo finem.
Q(uintus) Core(lius) Fortis pat(er)
f(aciendum) c(urauit).
To the Spirits of the Departed.
Corellia Optata, aged 13.
Reclusive Manes, inhabiting the
Acherusian realm of Hades, whom
a little pile of ashes and the spirit
do seek after but a short light of
life – the body's shade: I, the
begetter of an innocent daughter,
trapped by wrongful hope,
wretched, bewail this, my daugh-
ter's ultimate destiny.
Quintus Corellius Fortis, the
father, had this made.

Belonging, safety, and serenity are aspects that all three poems mentioned so far seem to share, and they do so especially on a private level. Yet they were of much wider relevance, as the following piece from Carvoran (Northumberland), comprising ten lines in an iambic rhythm on an altar dedicated to Tanit, the Heavenly Virgin, goes to show:

Imminet Leoni Virgo caelesti
situ spicifera iusti inuentrix
urbium conditrix:
ex quis muneribus nosse contigit
deos. ergo eadem Mater diuum,
Pax, Virtus, Ceres, dea Syria
lance uitam et iura pensitans.
in caelo uisum Syria sidus edidit
Libyae colendum; inde
cuncti didicimus.
Ita intellexit numine inductus
tuo. Marcus Caecilius Donatianus
militans tribunus
in praefecto dono principis.
Virgo, in her heavenly realm, is
close to Leo: holding ears of
grain, the inventor of justice,
foundress of cities: gifts that
allowed us to recognise the gods.
Thus she is also the Mother of the
Gods, Peace, Virtue, Ceres, the
Syrian Goddess, administering
shares of life and justice with her
scales.
Syria gave rise to this constella-
tion, to be seen in the sky, to be
worshipped in Libya; that is how
we all have acquired our know-
ledge.
Thus came to understanding,

persuaded by your divine will,
Marcus Caecilius Donatianus,
who serves the army as a tribune
in the post of prefect, granted by
the Emperor.

Donatianus, of African origin most likely, led a unit of Syrians – and they, in turn, found themselves in Roman Britain amidst individuals from many other parts of the Roman commonwealth. What did they have in common? What united them? What made them serve the Roman empire and endure continuous hardship in Rome's northernmost province? The creation of unity within such diversity under very difficult circumstances must have been a major concern for military leaders, and it would appear that Donatianus sought to approach this through the identification of a religious theme to which they could all relate. His inscription combines astronomical, astrological, and religious aspects, suggesting the worship of a deity in all its different manifestations, drawing from the great variety of cultures and cults across the Roman empire and invoking heavenly justice and general prosperity.

Poetry as displacement activity

Many of those who put up verse inscriptions in Roman Britain were not native to its shores. This is true not only for those who arrived, and sometimes stayed, in Britain as soldiers, craftsmen, and doctors associated with the Roman army. It is also true for provincial governors and administrators, and, in fact, it is true for a much broader range of individuals who eventually came to, and settled in, Britain in the hope of making a living there, striking out alone or following relatives.

Displaced from their native countries, these individuals were well aware of their nature as outsiders, and it certainly mattered to them to remain recognisable as arrivals. Thus a short composition with an underlying dactylic rhythm from Carlisle (Cumbria) commemorates a Greek citizen:

D(is) M(anibus).
Fla(uiu)s Antigonus Papias
ciuis Gr(a)ecus uixit annos
plus minus LX. quem ad
modum accom(m)odatam
fatis animam reuocauit.
Septimia domina [- - -]

To the Spirits of the Departed.
Flavius Antigonus Papias, Greek
citizen, lived 60 years, give or take
a few: he made his soul return to
the Fates, having harboured it
thus far.
Septimia ... mistress ...

In a similar vein, the following example from York, again partly composed in a

dactylic rhythm, commemorates the Sardinian origins of a female:

Iul(iae) Fortunat(a)e, domo
Sardinia. Verec(undio) Diogeni
fida coniuncta
marito.
*For Julia Fortunata, whose home-
land was Sardinia. To Verecundius
Diogenes devotedly coupled, who
was her husband.*

What unites these two otherwise presumably altogether unrelated individuals is that they are commemorated in a poetizing form, and that monumental, publicly displayed poetry, just like them, had arrived in Britain as a stranger.

A golden future?

Many of Roman Britain's new arrivals will have been united in their desire to achieve prosperity and relative stability of life – themes that feature in several verse inscriptions from Roman Britain: in other words, would Rome's victory ever turn out to be a golden one for them, as the graffito from Comb Crag, above, had put it?

More often than not, the picture that emerges from Roman Britain's verse inscriptions is one that is bleak rather than golden. Yet, hope dies last. A businessman from Bowness-on-Solway (Cumbria) certainly believed in his opportunities when, in a short piece in an iambic rhythm, he linked his desire to do well financially to a rather costly promise:

[Ant?]onianus dedico.
[s]ed date, ut fetura quaestus
suppleat uotis fidem:
aureis sacrabo carmen
mox uiritim litteris.
*... I, Antonianus, dedicate this. But
grant my requests, so that the
proceeds of my business may lend
credence to my promises: I will
consecrate a poem, in due course,
with golden letters, every single
one of them.*

Whether or not Antonianus' wishes were granted remains unknown: no golden letters survive, however, nor does an inscription related to him to which golden letters once were mounted.

The shapes, forms, and metrical and linguistic standards of Britain's first surviving poems may seem to be as far removed from the standards of classical literary beauty as the province of Britannia from the city of Rome herself. Yet, all these texts must serve as vivid reminders of the democratic universality of poetry and song in the Roman empire – an export that was to stay even after Rome's legions withdrew, and an export that, after a rocky start, was eventually to see golden victory.

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Want to know more?

Where have these poems been published?

All inscriptions discussed here have previously been published in the volumes of the *Roman Inscriptions of Britain (RIB)*. If you enjoyed them, and would like to follow up on them, they are numbers 2447.9, 2448.6, 2491.148, 1954, 1228, 1253, 684, 1791, 955, 687, and 2059, respectively. All stone inscriptions can also be found online via <http://romaninscriptionsofbritain.org>.

Further material, and further poems from Roman Britain can also be accessed, free of charge, in Peter Kruschwitz's e-booklet *Undying Voices. The Poetry of Roman Britain* (Reading 2015) at <http://thepetrifiedmuse.blog/undying-voices/>.

These texts do not look like the poems of Virgil or Ovid at all. Why do you think they are poems?

Well spotted – and it is quite likely that, when Virgil and Ovid wrote their poems, what they wrote did not look much like our present-day editions either! The most obvious characteristic of Latin poems is that they are supposed to 'scan', i. e. the sequence of syllables constitutes a prescribed, recurring order of long and short syllables. These could be dactylic (– UU) or iambic (U – U –) in nature. The poets of the Latin inscriptions do not always follow these prescriptions with precision, however. But there are other hints as well, such as the use of poetic words, a fancy word order, or even the very layout in which a text has been presented. When looking at all those factors combined, one can be reasonably certain of a writer's poetic intentions, even if the rhythm sometimes went somewhat astray.